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ABSTRACT

Project Solid Start was designed to test the hypothesis that a carefully structured, integrated, and intensive program reinforcing the regular first grade curriculum in all aspects of the language arts would significantly reduce the numbers of children experiencing delay, difficulty, and failure in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. The program is a multidisciplinary team effort of two regular classroom teachers, a reading teacher, and a moderate special needs teacher, as well as a group of parent volunteers. Solid Start addresses two current concerns: reading and writing acquisition and the interface of regular and special education. In the program described, 16 children received 1-1.5 hours daily of small group teaching in reading and writing with the heaviest emphasis on reading. Most of the instructional materials were teacher-made. In the pilot year, all of the children passed the end-of-book test for the primer and met the mastery criteria on program-constructed instruments for evaluating oral reading. In addition, all the children were able to produce, without a model, both upper and lower case manuscript letters, correctly sized, spaced, and formed. When asked to cite the greatest benefit of the program, classroom teachers cited "attitude" even before skill growth. They felt that not having to talk with parents about possible learning disability and bypassing testing reduced family anxiety and contributed to the ease, confidence, and learning enthusiasm of the children. (RJC)

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PROJECT SOLID START

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PROJECT RATIONALE

PROJECT SOLID START was designed to test the hypothesis that a carefully structured, integrated and intensive program reinforcing the regular first grade curriculum in all aspects of the language arts would significantly reduce the numbers of children experiencing delay, difficulty and failure in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. The project was funded for planning and pilot stages by a State of Massachusetts Department of Education Horace Mann Grant and was implemented in a suburban school system north of Boston. The pilot school's population is predominantly lower middle class.

"Zero Failure" in first grade is the main goal of the program, with immediately available developmental support replacing a post-failure remedial model. The program is a multidisciplinary team effort of two regular classroom teachers, a reading teacher and a moderate special needs teacher as well as a group of parent volunteers. SOLID START addresses both current concerns with reading/writing acquisition and with the interface of regular and special education. It moves beyond a commitment to early identification to a promise of "early provision" for a population defined by first grade teachers as "at risk." The premise is that this concerted team effort should eliminate the need for subsequent special education services for all but genuinely handicapped children.

SOLID START'S goal is to enable all first grade children to experience success in the regular classroom. Our contention is that early intervention and daily reinforcement will enable virtually all first graders to keep pace with a peer group functioning within the regular classroom curriculum. The program does not promise to move all children through the first grade curriculum on a predetermined schedule, but rather to offer support as needed so that all children can make confident and productive gains in reading and the related language arts at a pace that allows them to remain integrated members of the class.

It is further our view that children who make a confident and enthusiastic start will have fewer difficulties in subsequent years. We anticipate that these "pounds" of prevention will not only lessen the need for later remediation, but will reduce behavior problems from the very beginning. We also predict that this model will allow a useful differentiation between developmental differences or slow learning ability and true learning disability, while providing a treatment model that is not inappropriately dependent on overtaxed moderate special needs services delivered in a classic "pull out" format.

PROJECT SOLID START also responds to a long-standing need expressed by the system's first-grade teachers for a transitional class between K and 1 to provide for children ready for a full day of academically oriented program but not yet mature enough to handle the standard curriculum. Respectful of the transitional year concept, but recognizing present logistical and political impediments to implementation of a transitional program, SOLID START provides "horizontal time" in the form of frequent and intensive teaching interventions for those children not yet ready for standard curriculum demands in the standard model.

Each child in the program receives 1-1/2 hours daily of small group teaching in reading/writing--with the heavy emphasis on reading in effect offering the slower bloomer three times the reading instruction of his more mature or able peers.

Our commitment is to working within the regular classroom curriculum and structure, combining the resources of regular and special educators to support the process of beginning literacy. The SOLID START program has been a "quiet revolution," a process of reconciling developmental differences with standard expectations in a very traditional public school setting. It has allowed us to change the focus from the child's failures or deficiencies to the child's accomplishments and to create a climate for modifying the environment rather than rectifying the child. Since reality constraints on the program's ambitions do not at this point move us toward altering classroom curriculum or methods overtly, our mandate remains supporting the existing program and the classroom teachers. With this stance, our project has been readily accepted and has required very little administrative support. It is our view that this model is widely replicable and is a useful first step toward a more contemporary and holistic approach to developmental literacy. This program was not designed in preference to a more radical restructuring but as a way to institute an immediate, non-controversial reform at a time when more overall changes were unlikely and distant.

PROJECT SOLID START is predicated on these contentions:

- Early school failure is more frequently the result of a mismatch between the pace of the curriculum and the developmental status of the child than an identifiable learning disability.
- The difficulties created by this mismatch can be treated by direct teaching is small groups with low child-teacher ratios, allowing for consistent opportunities for additional practice as preliminary learning takes place.
- While Special Education has paid lip service to prevention, it has difficulty disengaging from the model whereby first the child must fail, then his needs can be addressed.
- "Consultation" by special educators is of limited use to classroom teachers. Most classroom teachers are already "dancing as fast as they can." Their problem is not that they don't know what to do for struggling students, but that they don't have the time to do it.
- Initial supportive efforts should involve the least dramatic intervention as well as the least restrictive setting. Toward this end the variable most easily manipulated is teaching. The regular class curriculum and materials are left intact and are made appropriate for the whole population through individualized and small group teaching. The technique is to reduce the prescribed curriculum to manageable units and then to offer many opportunities for reinforcement.
- Despite the increasing numbers of working mothers resources remain available in most communities for volunteer participation in early learning programs.
- Providing experiences where children can succeed allows them to cope with fear that they are not capable and makes them available for learning.
- Competency gained in small group work increases ability to perform unsupervised independent work. Exposure to readily available adults in small groups does not foster dependency but, on the contrary, generates the confidence necessary for participation in self-directed activities in the classroom.
- "Early Provision" deals with both the problem of overdiagnosis and that of neglect. Since PROJECT SOLID START has no formalities for entrance or termination, no child lacks opportunity for treatment and no child is treated beyond his need.
- Confidence and success dissipate behavior problems.
- Programs that work within the system and develop gradually are likely to be enthusiastically accepted and supported.
- Prevention is the best intervention.

LOGISTICS

Children are selected by the classroom teachers at the end of the first week of school with consultation available from MSN (Moderate Special Needs) and Reading Teachers. Any child seen as having a skill deficit or learning style interfering with adequate progress in the classroom is deemed eligible for the program. For example, a child whose beginning work in oral reading is satisfactory but who cannot work independently or form letters correctly is provided for if the classroom teacher feels progress in the classroom is threatened. PROJECT SOLID START addresses development of any skill or behavior seen as essential to the language arts program of first grade.

Since children can enter or leave the program at the classroom teacher's discretion, and since the program remains open throughout the school year, the selection process is demystified. The contention that experienced teachers can identify young children at risk as well as formal evaluation instruments has been corroborated in the pilot program -- out of 18 children initially selected only two were withdrawn after brief exposure and no child was added. This selection process has been cost effective in the immediate sense as well as in its long range promise. There is no time lag prior to intervention as there is in typical evaluation procedures and none of the considerable costs of the usual testing, report writing and meetings.

In the first year, out of a class of 48 children 18 were selected for the program. Two were dropped in October, two moved out of the community and three were terminated in mid-February, leaving 11 children continuing to participate. The children were seen in three groups and received a total of close to an hour of additional direct small group instruction with the Reading and MSN teachers assisted by parent volunteers. By May only six children required the full program time.

The SOLID START program is supplemental to the classroom reading program and does not replace daily reading with the classroom teachers, who have scheduled their reading groups around SOLID START sessions. Visitors have been impressed by the availability of the children for an hour's concentrated reading and writing in the program in addition to their classroom work. They also notice that the children do not appear fatigued or restless. Our assumption is that given attention, recognition and opportunities for success, children become avid readers and writers.

A letter was sent to all first grade parents at the very start of the school year explaining that PROJECT SOLID START is part of the regular program and thereby does not require any screening, testing or parent permission. This allows for immediate access and short-term or extended participation as best suits the child's needs.

Parent volunteers were selected from PTA and classroom teachers' suggestions by availability for participation one morning each week for 1-1/2 hours. They have been loyal and effective overall and have ranged in training from current graduate students in education to high school graduates. There has been some attrition as mothers found paying jobs or had difficulty with child-care arrangements. The volunteers were offered brief individual training sessions of approximately 45 minutes as they were recruited and were quickly able to grasp and model the three main tenets of our program: encouragement of linguistic prediction, focus on visual analysis and large doses of positive reinforcement.

METHOD

Following the Scott Foresman basal-based classroom curriculum, SOLID START begins by reinforcing letter recognition and consonant sound-symbol relationships. Small group and individual presentations utilize blackboard, charts, letter cards, plastic letters and individualized student worksheets. Beginning Scott Foresman based vocabulary is introduced even if letter recognition is not yet at 100 percent mastery. Children are provided with notebooks to take home so they can "practice" and "read" to their families. Take home materials are kept at mastery level so that children are always demonstrating success at home.

The program uses some Scott Foresman materials; vocabulary cards, vocabulary workbooks and charts; but most of the instructional materials are teacher-made. These consist of simple mimeographed sheets containing sentences and short paragraphs reusing the classroom reader vocabulary. The children's own names and expressed interests are used to personalize the text and spark interest. Materials are generated to respond to individual difficulties and to individual passions.

Godzilla, Tyrannosaurus Rex and King Kong are introjected on demand as is grandma when she comes to visit. Recycling the Scott Foresman vocabulary around these local heroes keeps the children eager for the next mimeographed or xeroxed or computer-printed story. Envelopes in bright colors containing story cards and sentence strips in various colors are other simple devices used in our program. The availability now of inexpensive blank books allows us to make books for the children and for them to make books to share.

In addition, various techniques to keep the process active are employed. Children play "cross out" with expendable word lists or games where they accumulate or discard word cards and sentence strips. Close contact with adults and ready response to difficulties and successes appears to be very sustaining for the children. Their enthusiasm stems from their own developing competence and from the relationship with teachers and volunteers around their work. After several months, children become able to work in pairs remaining well focused on tasks as teachers and volunteers work with others in the group.

Learning to look rather than to guess from initial letter or incomplete analysis is a major thrust of the reading program as is developing awareness that reading is talk written down. Miscalls are corrected with a gentle "Take another look" or a query, often with introjected humor, about the logical likelihood of the sentence as read. New vocabulary is introduced only when previous sight words are recognized at better than 85 percent reliability.

Children who experience difficulty remaining focused on task without direct supervision practice in the small group, often working alone for "10 minutes on the timer" as a means of developing independent work habits.

Correct pencil grip and formation, sizing and spacing of upper and lower case manuscript letters is achieved in regular, closely supervised practice sessions.

This close supervision and regular reinforcement has allowed all participating children to be functional writers by mid year. They enjoy writing sentences in their notebooks, modeling the sentences provided for them, and often write at home bringing their work to school to share.

A cognitive approach has been the overall governing principle, helping the children to become aware of their own behaviors and to assume control of their own learning. More than teaching reading, we teach the children how to learn reading. By mid-year, they are aware of their own decoding strategies as well as their attending and focusing behaviors.

RESULTS OF PILOT PROGRAM

PROJECT SOLID START was initiated with the hypothesis that appropriately supported, virtually all first graders could learn to read and write at a level of competence sufficient to allow for confidence and pleasure in the process and in themselves as fully functional members of their classes. We have succeeded in doing this with some additional benefits: an increased sense of community among classroom teachers, specialists and parents and an expanded definition of the normal learner.

The issues of assessment engaging most of us involved in primary reading have been considered in our program design. We clearly adhere to our goal of comfortable progress, not prescribed accomplishment, and feel confident we have been able to accomplish this while having the children participate in the usual testing accompanying their Scott Foresman basal series. The children in our program are not tested or moved ahead in the series until they have demonstrated "mastery" with us in repeated presentations of the basal vocabulary and skills. Since we are continually creating materials and exercises reusing this vocabulary in stories reflecting the children's ideas and interests, they have remained enthusiastic and motivated as well as increasingly confident about their abilities as readers. To date, they have all fared splendidly on the traditional instruments used to test reading in their classrooms.

Our sense is that "mastery" in regard to reading is no longer a fashionable concept. But for this population, in this school setting, it is an essential base for the children's confidence in themselves as learners. Our program separates "repeated" from "drill" by offering the children many exposures to the basal vocabulary, but in various and frequently changing formats. In our process we find the children integrating and articulating the strategies we all share in reading. In "partner reading," when the children read to each other in pairs, we are continually gratified when they remind each other of these techniques:

"Are we in a hurry?"
"Does that make sense?"
"Would your mother say that to you?"
"Did you really look?"

Our thrust is first "making sense," and then visual analysis. For many of our children focal attention is not well developed and we want to foster habits of careful observation.

Prefaced by this apologia for basals, for mastery, for testing, we offer these results expressed in the business-as-usual format, but buttressed by the daily observations of the children reading we feel are the real measure.

In the pilot year all of the children passed the end-of-book test for the primer, with the lowest score 10 points above the cut off. In addition, all these children met our mastery criteria on program-constructed instruments for evaluating oral reading: word lists and paragraphs constructed from Scott Foresman primer vocabulary. The six children proceeding at the slowest pace completed two-thirds of the primer by the end of the school year, again with vocabulary retained at mastery level as documented in frequent program reviews. Eight children finished the program reading well into the first reader.

All the children were able to produce, without a model, both upper and lower case manuscript letters, correctly sized, spaced and formed. Incidence of reversals was within grade expectation. All participating children furthermore were within grade expectation for appearance of written assignments and workbook pages.

Three children out of the original 18 were referred to the MSN screening team. One child, who came to first grade from another community with the suggestion that parents seek evaluation, was dropped from the program before the end of the school year, obviating the need for referral. These figures compare with six first grade referrals in a school with similar population using the traditional MSN and remedial reading model; and five first grade referrals at our own school in the year prior to the start of the program.

When asked to cite the greatest benefit of the program as they saw it, the classroom teachers placed "attitude" even before skill growth. They felt that eliminating the need for discussion with parents of possible learning disability and bypassing testing reduced anxiety in families and contributed to the ease and confidence of the children and their enthusiasm for learning.

As we anticipated, follow through of the population in grade 2 supports the view that we can't "love them and leave them." The remedial reading population in second grade consists of two newcomers to the school, one child who had no difficulty in first grade, and six former participants in SOLID START. At mid-year consideration is being given to whether four half-hour remedial reading sessions weekly are sufficient to sustain three of our children. This finding has reinforced our view that ideally SOLID START should be an early primary, rather than exclusively first grade program and has led us to seek funding to expand our project through grade 2.

Our project further seeks to:

- Compare progress of first grade classes participating in SOLID START with control group of first grade classes in socio-economically equivalent school offering only the standard remedial reading and MSN services.

- Explore the inclusion of paraprofessional aides and the expansion of the volunteer pool beyond the parent population.

- Compare first grade classroom teachers' selection of at risk population with Kindergarten teachers' assessment and results of pre-school screening to better understand parameters of ability to predict success (defined as a comfortable fit) in first grade.

- Offer parent workshops to facilitate home/school communication and encourage parent involvement in early learning.

- Augment volunteer training and include on-the-job training for aide(s).

Our experience with PROJECT SOLID START has also helped us clarify our thinking as we attempt to deal with current theories distinguishing between teaching-focused and learning-focused approaches. For our population this is a false dichotomy; for the children in our program there is no learning without teaching. These children need more teaching, not less. Direct, close, structured, therapeutic, "micro" teaching. This population, for a range of reasons, are not yet able to self regulate or to sustain focus and need a consistent relationship with a supportive teacher who is able to be both recognizing of the child and comfortably directive. In a group of 24 or 25 first graders and one teacher, school can be an isolating and even frightening experience for children who cannot keep pace with the main thrust of the classroom. The individual recognition and support a program such as ours provides results in increased comfort and confidence and decreased anxiety. As the children integrate the skills and learning strategies we "teach" them and become more successful in the classroom, they are less vulnerable to anxiety-provoked behavior both in the learning situation and in overall classroom socialization. Our position is that between the learning disabled and the "natural" learners the whole language approach describes there is a population of normal but "fragile" learners in need of close teaching in a structured as well as interactive setting.

The SOLID START program has also relieved the classroom teachers of a lonely responsibility. Sensing a joint accountability, they are more easily able to adjust pace and demand to the learner, and to create a more developmental approach within a basically curriculum driven model. The program has also garnered support for the view that discrepancies in learning rates and styles do not constitute disorder in the child, but rather a need in the system for a developmental approach with support mechanisms a component of the regular curriculum.

This program remains outside contending beliefs and assumptions about reading methods to the extent that it says whatever your approach, the regular school program should provide an opportunity for all children to enjoy learning to read and write. The introduction of extra adults in the process of beginning literacy is a key expedient in accommodating varying rates of development and individual differences in learning style. Perhaps most important of all, the sense of the classroom as a community is enhanced when resources are marshalled so that all the children can be active and progressing learners.